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AUTHOR Ryan, Cynthia A.
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ABSTRACT

A clear assumption in much of the current theory about cultural studies in composition is that the classroom is an appropriate and necessary site for teaching strategies for social resistance. Students who learn to challenge their culture through reading and writing critically about its artifacts and codes will carry these empowering skills into their everyday lives. However, many instructors will have experienced the frustrating lack of urgency with which students approach many cultural studies issues. The field of risk communication has much to offer instructors of cultural studies composition. Broadly defined, risk communication refers to the "interactive process of exchange of information and opinion among individuals, groups, and institutions...involving multiple messages about the nature of risk." A course on risk communication would encourage students to begin with issues that matter to them, issues that they feel represent a real risk in their lives. A course might begin, for instance, by reading Michael Oreskes' "Profiles of Today's Youth: They Couldn't Care Less," which many students find to be an unfair characterization of their generation. Further, risk communication affords the opportunity for students to analyze the rhetorical approaches employed in risk messages. Examining both the guidelines by which risk communicators regulate their messages and the resulting information that individuals receive can be an excellent source for cultural critique. (Contains nine references.) (TB)

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Personal Stakes: Putting the Risk Back into the Cultural Studies Composition Classroom

Cynthia A. Ryan

I begin with an epigraph from the National Research Council's Committee on Risk Perception and Communication: "To remain democratic, a society must find ways to put specialized knowledge into the service of public choice and keep it from becoming the basis of power for an elite" (United States 15).

A clear assumption in much of the current theory about cultural studies composition is that the classroom is an appropriate and necessary site for teaching strategies for social resistance. Students who learn to challenge their culture through reading and writing critically about its artifacts and codes will carry these empowering skills into their everyday lives. Tolerance of inequities will wane, it is suggested, once students understand the marginalizing practices that are produced, distributed, and consumed by society. What many of us are hesitant to admit, though, is that the personal stake which cultural studies composition teachers assume to be inherently present in the study of one's culture is often absent in pedagogical practice. While students might be willing to acknowledge that those members of society who are of a particular gender, race, class, or age do receive problematic messages via television or the workplace, this admission is often accompanied by a silent look or an unconcerned nod. Those for whom exploitation and missed opportunities are simply not a reality most comfortably believe that individuals have the power to refute all negative cultural influences in their lives and to "get out of the ghetto if they really want to."

In my own teaching of a cultural studies composition pedagogy, I have felt immense frustration over this seeming lack of urgency on students' parts to react against the cultural injustices occuring right beneath their noses. Though I ask them to ground their cultural critiques in personal experiences, relatively few bridge the gap between the "bad things happening out there" and their own secure positions in the world. They feel free to share what they think is right and wrong with society, but they explain that the effects on their freedoms and opportunities are

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minimal at best. Such reactions to a pedagogy that I envision as exciting and meaningful and personal lead to me to ask over and over again, "What happened to the risk, the personal stake, that most of us thought this wave of cultural studies in the composition classroom would awaken?"

I believe that the risks out of which certain cultural studies projects were born, in particular the questions raised by members of the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies regarding class (and later, race and gender) discrepancies in social discourses, are still the theoretical backdrop for most current cultural studies composition pedagogies. Yet for many of my students, personal concerns and fears don't always fit so neatly into this categorical matrix. By denying them the opportunity to define what issues they feel to be of most urgency and risk in their lives, we deny students the very impetus behind the introduction of cultural studies into the composition classroom. I do not want to imply that class, race, or gender issues are out of place in this context. Rather, I assert that they might be employed *if students choose* for the further exploration of topics that stem from their own sense of risk.

Recycling Categories: The Current Lack of Risk in Cultural Studies Composition Theory and Pedagogy

Many attempts have been made by cultural studies composition theorists to breathe new life into the standard categories of class, race, and gender as the starting point for cultural critique. Yet, the continual recycling of these terms has resulted in pedagogies that often lack a sense of real risk that might create active concern on the part of students.

Writing about the "new political sensibility" surrounding the integration of cultural studies into the composition curriculum, John Trimbur argues that the "question cultural studies leads us to ask is not just how writers write but how literacy has been, and can be, produced and used to increase democratic participation in public life, to give voice to the needs and experience of those who have been silenced and marginalized, to articulate political desires" (13). However, in many of the collections of cultural studies theory as well as in the available textbooks for teaching cultural studies composition, the answer to this question seems already to have been answered.

The pedagogies advanced primarily from Marxist and neo-Marxist perspectives suggest that there are specific lenses through which students should read and understand the voices of the dominant and the oppressed.

In a longer paper that is currently under review, I critique a number of theoretical and pedagogical articles as well as select cultural studies composition textbooks to further my point. However, for the sake of time, I want to move quickly now to an alternative appproach to teaching cultural studies composition.

Real Risks: Critiquing Issues That Matter in the Cultural Studies Composition Classroom

The field of risk communication has much to offer instructors of cultural studies composition who want to revive students' sense of personal risk in the discursive practices of their culture. Broadly defined, risk communication refers to the "interactive process of exchange of information and opinion among individuals, groups, and institutions, . . . involv[ing] multiple messages about the nature of risk." The term refers as well to "other messages, not strictly about risk, that express concerns, opinions, or reactions to risk messages or to legal and institutional arrangements for risk management" (United States 21). Introducing these messages (and the theory behind their dissemination) into the cultural studies composition classroom provides a number of opportunities that current pedagogies fail to offer, four of which I will detail further:

First, the study of risk communication as a cultural process allows students to choose topics of real risk for study. The "content" of the cultural studies composition course centers, then, on strategies for exploring the messages about these risks through a variety of media. Topics of risk are automatically situated in current sociohistorical contexts, involving issues with which our students as members of particular communities are concerned.

At the start of this semester, I asked students to read a selection of essays focusing on the concept of "generations" in Diana George and John Trimbur's text, *Reading Culture: Contexts for Reading and Writing*. Most of my students felt that the authors of these essays had sadly missed the mark in expressing what the concerns of their generation are. For example, in "Profiles of Today's Youth: They Couldn't Care Less," Michael Oreskes argues that members of

today's MTV generation fail to involve themselves in political issues and worldly events in the committed way that youths from past eras had. My students responded angrily to such accusations, stating that they have a number of issues about which they feel quite strongly. Unfortunately, many claimed, they feel powerless to change the world that they have "inherited" from those past generations whom authors like Oreskes praise. The reasons for their sense of disempowerment? They are inundated with messages about the complexity and dishonesty and inflexibility of the political system. Further, they are overwhelmed by the devastating messages they receive via television and magazines about the dire state of a society with little promise of a better future. Though the list of student-generated concerns over such issues as AIDS and drugs and violence was lengthy and diverse, the class had absolutely no faith in their ability to decipher the "system" and to get "democracy" to work for their needs.

A course centered on risk communication would encourage students to begin with issues that matter to them, issues that they feel represent real risk in their lives. The frustration that results from the onslaught of messages about these issues can be viewed as an opportunity to teach students how communication constructs our perspectives about certain dangers (e.g., AIDS) and about diverse groups of people in society (e.g., homosexuals). Essentializing statements such as "Nothing I do will make a difference" or "We'll probably all die from environmental poisoning anyway" are clearly tied to the multiple risk messages distributed daily across a range of media, from classrooms to television tabloids to local newspapers to community interest groups. It makes sense, then, to help students untangle *these* messages so that they can more intelligently judge for themselves just how much control they *do* have in their lives and how much power they have to effect change in the environments within which they interact.

And now, the second opportunity risk communication affords cultural studies composition. Because risk communicators must consider rhetorical factors when preparing scientific findings for public consumption, there is an element of selectivity in every risk message. Examining both the guidelines by which risk communicators regulate their messages and the resulting information that individuals receive can be an excellent source for cultural critique.

Discursive practices focusing on issues of risk are always situated subjectively. In *Improving Risk Communication*, the "bible" of risk communication dos and don'ts, the United States National Research Council attempts to identify types of risk messages and to define the key factors involved in their creation and reception. Clearly, the content and dissemination of risk information relies on considerations that are highly value-laden in nature. Both the institutional and political systems that regulate standards for risk as well as the persons involved in communicating them are greatly influenced by personal, corporate, governmental, and above all, *cultural* priorities.

Acknowledgement of the subjective nature of risk messages is what complicates what some might consider to be simply a matter of technical clarity and fair representation of scientific facts The credibility and priorities of the source of messages, the translation of findings geared toward appropriate public reactions, the selection of audience members, and the medium of transmission all factor into the "process" of getting messages about risk across to the public. For instance, consider the ongoing war over tobacco. We have been exposed recently to conflicting testimonies from tobacco companies about their knowledge of the risk involved in smoking. Not surprisingly, representatives from RJ Reynolds interpret the data from smoking studies quite differently than those speaking on behalf of public health agencies. In response, smokers might weigh their loyalty to cigarette manufacturers in determining which risk messages to accept or reject. Nonsmokers, on the other hand, might eagerly accuse RJ Reynolds of wrongdoing and welcome the additional risk associated with tobacco consumption without careful consideration of the scientific data. In either case, the reception of risk messages may not be based much at all on the available risk *information* around which the debate is centered.

The tendency for the public to identify "villians" in risk situations is further evidence of the subjective nature of this form of communication. Often, "when people who are perceived to be innocent are put into jeopardy, discussions about intent, justice, blame, and punishment are almost inevitable" (United States 58-59). Our students, along with the majority of the population, are eager to jump on the bandwagon of accusations when risk threatens to affect their lives. A course

focused on teaching students to decipher risk messages can lead them to study these stories of blame by critiquing the data and language used to construct stereotypes about certain members of society.

Included in the National Research Council's guidelines is the suggestion that "A Consumer's Guide to Risk and Risk Communication" be written for the general public. Such a guide would outline the basic knowledge necessary for citizens to understand more clearly both the process by which risk messages are constructed and conveyed and the strategies that individuals can use to analyze and interpret them. Simplified definitions and explanations of such notions as *comparability* (e.g., the risk caused by smoking as compared to the risk taken when riding a bicycle down a busy city street), *risk magnitudes* (e.g., determining just how great a risk one is taking by living in a certain area of the United States), and *validity of findings* are ways in which we can make more Americans "risk literate" (180-82). Involvement in the formation and translation of risk messages seems a much better way to teach our students how discursive practices work than situating them in closed contexts such as class and asking them to locate experiences that fall within the boundaries established by the teacher.

The third opportunity that risk communication offers cultural studies composition is this. Focusing on concrete messages versus on abstract categories for study (e.g., race, class, or gender) encourages students to situate *themselves* in discursive practices. Rather than beginning with prefabricated units which limit their ideas, students are able to draw conclusions about power relations and institutional influences in their daily lives by examining the use of data and language to motivate public opinion and behavior regarding risk.

Government and corporate risk communication practices have been widely criticized over the past few decades, as citizens and members of private and public interest organizations claim that dishonest and inaccurate messages have affected regulations that fail to protect all social groups. The voices of cultural studies theorists seem to resonate in such criticisms of the "system" for failing to treat people fairly and equally (Rowan 398). Yet, rather than beginning with stories of race or class or gender mistreatment, critics of risk assessment, communication,

and management go to the source of problematic discursive practices. When public and private interest groups identify a lack of information or an overlooked audience in risk communication that leads or contributes to discriminatory conclusions and resulting policies, they also identify concrete data upon which to lodge their campaigns for change.

For instance, a risk issue such as breast cancer is best explored by situating critique in actual discursive practices. This second leading cause of death in women occurs far more frequently among affluent caucasions living in developed countries than among poor minorities living either in developed or third world countries. The increased rate is believed to be the result of a higher fat diet among the more affluent population.

However, women of lower socioeconomic classes and marginalized races diagnosed with breast cancer are more likely to die of the disease than middle to upper class caucasions. The finding of risk communicators is that less public education about breast cancer is disseminated in the communities to which marginalized women belong (Laurence and Weinhouse 115). Viewing this issue through narrow lenses might result in an oversimplified analysis of the problem. In fact, it is the *access* to risk messages about breast cancer that is key to apparent discrepancies in diagnosis and mortality. The discursive practices informing research and communication about the disease are far more complex than critiques based on isolated factors like class or race allow.

And finally, the fourth opportunity provided by risk communication. The reception of risk communication has very real consequences for public attitude, behavior, and policy. While in many critical cultural studies pedagogies, the political implications of cultural study are merely assumed, a course based on risk communication incorporates the political from the start. Students can influence the formulation and perception of risk messages by actively exploring their implications and responding to those individuals and institutions responsible for producing them.

A cultural studies composition course focusing on risk communication provides students with the tools for participating in the public sector. According to Niklas Luhmann, author of *Risk: A Sociological Theory*, media rely on individuals and groups in society to keep interest in risk issues alive. Only through the identification of conflicting views and values regarding risks

can the debate about how scientific data is gathered, disseminated, and standardized through public policy continue over time (142). Students clearly need to gain some knowledge, then, about how to assess risk information and participate in its transference to the public if they want to maintain the freedom to make choices concerning health and safety. And, in the composition classroom, they must be empowered to select their own topics of risk for paper assignments.

Not surprisingly, although citizens today are guaranteed the "right to know" (referring to a US bill passed in 1986) when they are exposed to harmful situations or to products that might pose additional personal risk, few question the content or distribution of information that they receive. Perhaps this passivity results from schooling that fails to teach students how to challenge the voice of authority, even when scientific findings have the potential to disrupt the individual freedoms upon which democracy is based.

In the past several years, some attempts to incorporate risk into the classroom have been made. However, in most cases, the teacher selects the risk issues, and the avenues for critique rest on predetermined categories of race, class, or gender (Bowen; Kutzer). Though James Berlin and Michael Vivion claim in *Cultural Studies in the English Classroom* that "cultural studies is not a prescribed content, but instead a method or various methods of making meaning and exploring how meaning is made" (xiv), most pedagogies cover quite similar topics or contexts. I suggest that the cultural studies composition course should deliver what it promises. We *can* teach students methodologies that will enable them to participate in society as more informed, productive citizens. For instance, we might teach them to read and discuss "visual" representations of scientific data; my experiences with freshmen and more advanced composition students is that most lack the knowledge to read even basic graphics representing facts and figures in the local newspaper. Also, students could be asked to participate in local organizations (e.g., a battered women's shelter) that work with individuals who have firsthand experiences with risk issues. And, members of the class can research the institutional and media sources of information about their issues, and culminate their findings in the direct interaction with these entities via a

letter or a report. Class discussions could revolve around the sharing of each student's unique risk project.

Cultural studies composition needs to be revived as a project for meaningful political engagement with real risks. Recovery of the personal stakes that students bring to the classroom is one means for this revival.

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